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# "It's Very Isolating":

# Discourse Strategies of Conservative Student Groups on a Liberal University Campus

A Thesis submitted in partial completion of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Linguistics

by

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June 2019

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ABSTRACT

"It's Very Isolating": Discourse Strategies of Conservative Student Groups on a Liberal University Campus

by

Jamaal Justin Muwwakkil

As national political polarization increases in the United States, the number of studies attempting to make sense of politically conservative movements has increased. Several studies portray the contentious election of Donald Trump as a consequence of the rise of the so called "alt-right," an amorphous movement promoting racism and anti-PC (politically correct) culture and policies. Given the online nature of the alt-right movement, some scholars and journalists have traced its rise and characteristics by examining the discourse of online spaces. Others have looked to "red" or politically conservative states to better understand the experiences of this emergent population, with researchers going to "Trump Country" to speak to largely white rural Americans in the South and Midwest. Online approaches investigate mostly younger conservatives but only through a digital medium, while ethnographic approaches capture in-person data, but only from a population that skews older and more rural.

By ethnographically focusing on conservative student groups on a liberal University of California campus, this thesis instead highlights conservative political identity formation

outside typical conservative bastions. The guiding research questions for this study are the following: How do conservative students discursively navigate the liberal context in which they find themselves? What is the purpose of provocative activities such as controversial guest speaker invitations? How does conservative student discourse align with or depart from national conservative political discourse? And how is "free speech" understood among conservative students on college campuses? Three discursive strategies emerged from this study: *contrastive essentialism*, *appropriation of liberal discourse*, and *memeing*. These discursive strategies of conservative students are deployed together with an ideology of "free speech" as constrained by liberals. This thesis argues that, while conservative student spaces can serve as a transitional space for some students, the ideology of "free speech" as constrained renders in-group moderation difficult and, thus, attracts and empowers bigots. These bigots are able to maintain plausible deniability, utilizing the above discursive strategies to obfuscate their bigotry. Understanding the discourse of this demographic is crucial, as the current college generation is forming its political identity in one of the most turbulent times in recent history. This ethnographic engagement with such groups offers linguistic insight into bridge-building strategies, college campus climate concerns, and freedom of speech issues.

## Introduction

On February 23, 2017, Joe Scarborough, former congressperson and prominent conservative host of the MSNBC show "Morning Joe," commented on an article in *New York* magazine by another establishment conservative political commentator, Andrew Sullivan, entitled "A Mole in the White House" (Sullivan 2017). The article offered commentary about Trump-appointed speech writer and policy advisor Steven Miller, an extreme conservative raised in Santa Monica, California and an alum of Duke University. The following is an excerpt from the article highlighted on the show:

> I feel like I know him because I used to be a little like him. He's a classic type: a rather dour right-of-center kid whose conservatism was radicalized by lefties in the educational system. No, I'm not blaming liberals for Miller's grim fanaticism. I am noting merely that right-of-center students are often mocked, isolated, and anathematized on campus, and their response is often, sadly, a doubling down on whatever it is that progressives hate. Before too long, they start adopting brattish and obnoxious positions — just to tick off their SJW [Social Justice Warrior] peers and teachers. After a while, you're not so much arguing for conservatism as against leftism, and eventually the issues fade and only the hate remains. (Sullivan 2017)

Reflecting on his own experience as a conservative student who attended a large state university, Scarborough echoed Sullivan's sentiments and went on to rail against the treatment of conservative students in liberal college contexts. Scarborough's comments imagined the circumstances under which an otherwise reasonable conservative student might be pushed into radical behavior as a direct consequence of perceived ideological bullying: "If I can't even say mainstream conservative thought in the class, then I may as well have an affirmative action bake sale. The hell with them." He then broadened the scope of the indictment to include not only a particular school or classroom context but the American academic system at large: "It is one of the great failings of this country. One of the great failings of our academic system. That it is so illiberal. That unless you don't march in lock

step in the best college campuses in this country, you are shunned. So what do you end up doing? You get shoved to extreme positions, just to push back on extreme hatred that you face from the second that you walk into an elite institution."

Central to both Sullivan's article and Scarborough's response is the premise that conservatism is "radicalized by lefties in the educational system." The perceived trauma of conservative students on college campuses is argued by these commentators to inform the affect and actions of such students. Contemporary instantiations of these "brattish and obnoxious" actions include events like the affirmative action bake sale[1] that Scarborough alludes to and, infamously, inviting provocative speakers to campus. Self-proclaimed provocateurs such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Anne Coulter are among a growing list of invited speakers framed by conservatives as improving universities' "viewpoint diversity," while also serving to "trigger the liberals." Many of these invitations have been met with large-scale protests, like those seen at California State University, Los Angeles (February 2016) and the University of California, Berkeley (April 2017). Consequently, some speakers were disinvited, or only spoke while facing varying degrees of resistance. Some commentators see these speaker invitations as a promotion of hateful ideologies that threaten the safety of vulnerable populations on campus (Bauman 2017). Others propose that these events foster "viewpoint diversity" and should be protected as freedom of speech (Haidt and Jussim 2016). Against the backdrop of this fraught moment, this thesis investigates the nascent political identity construction of conservative students in liberal college contexts as

[1] An affirmative action bake sale involves the selling of baked goods on campus in which the price one pays is based on one's race or ethnicity. The goal is to discredit affirmative action policies as unfair.

evidenced through face-to-face discourse in conservative student spaces, and isolates the discursive strategies deployed by those students.

As national political polarization increases in the United States, the number of studies attempting to make sense of radical politically conservative movements has increased (Gallup Knight Foundation 2016). Some studies have seen the contentious election of Donald Trump as a consequence of the rise of the so called "alt-right," an amorphous movement promoting racism and anti-PC (politically correct) culture and policies (Hawley 2017). Given the online nature of the alt-right movement, some scholars and journalists have traced its rise and characteristics by examining the discourse of online spaces (Neiwert 2017; Salazar 2018). Some examine Trump directly, highlighting his rhetorical style and use of gesture in his public appearances (Sclafani 2017) and how his style might be appealing for its entertainment quality (Hall et al 2016). Others have looked to "red" or politically conservative states to better understand the experiences of this emergent population, with researchers going to "Trump Country" to speak to largely white rural Americans in the South and Midwest (Frank 2007; Hochschild 2016). These varied studies have yielded useful but partial information about contemporary conservatives. Online approaches have investigated mostly younger conservatives but only through a digital medium, while ethnographic approaches captured in-person data, but only from a population that skews older and more rural. Binder and Wood (2013) in their book *Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives* offer valuable analysis by comparing interviews from conservative students from an East Coast and a West Coast university, but they do not employ an ethnographic lens and thus omit crucial cultural context.

By ethnographically focusing on conservative student groups on a liberal University of California campus, this thesis differs from previous research in highlighting conservative political identity formation outside typical conservative bastions. My guiding research questions are the following: How do these students discursively navigate the liberal context in which they find themselves? What is the purpose of provocative activities such as controversial guest speaker invitations? How does conservative student discourse align with or depart from national conservative political discourse? Understanding the discourse of this demographic is crucial as the current college generation is forming its political identity in one of the most turbulent times in recent history. My ethnographic engagement with these groups offers linguistic insight into bridge-building strategies, college campus climate concerns, and freedom of speech issues.

## The Political Climate of the University of California

The current prominence and character of conservative student activism is rooted in a long history. Right-wing pushback against political liberalism on college campuses peaked in four different periods that represent key moments of discursive contestation: the 1950s with the Levering Act; 1964 with the Free Speech Movement; the late 1980s with the anti-political correctness movement; and the mid 2000s with the Academic Bill of Rights (Aby 2007) and conservative campus speaking tours. The University of California historically has been a pivotal site of much of this political activity and controversy. In 1950, the California State Legislature enacted the Levering Act, which added "anti-subversive" content to the California Loyalty Oath, which had been created when California gained statehood (California Government Code 3100-3109). It required that state employees, including those

at the University of California, take the revised oath in order to be paid. University employees could not maintain positions at the University of California if they had previously or currently held "radical" beliefs, including being sympathetic to communist ideologies. The passage of this law and its enforcement led the university to dismiss several employees, resulting in protests and lawsuits (Pockman v. Leonard, 39 Cal.2d 676). Employees claimed that the act violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution by requiring a political test for employment. After numerous court battles, in 1967 the California Supreme Court found the content added by the Levering Act to be unconstitutional (Vogel v. County of Los Angeles, 68 Cal.2d 18).

Adjudicating the rights of public employees with regard to non-dominant political positionalities helped frame the University of California as an ideological battlefield and served as a precursor to the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1964, students engaged in large-scale student protests which collectively came to be known as the Free Speech Movement. This movement was in response to a university policy that restricted political fundraising other than by Republican and Democratic school-sponsored organizations (Cohen & Zelnick 2002). The arrest of a student who tabled on campus in order to raise funds for the Congress of Racial Equity (CORE) sparked the protests, which utilized many of the tactics deployed in the contemporaneously developing Civil Rights Movement. Thousands of students demonstrated, resulting in changes to university policy allowing broader political engagement on campus. While the students who participated in these protests comprised diverse constituencies, advocacy for freedom of speech at the University of California was largely fought for by members of the political left.

Conservatism again clashed with student activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when left-wing political pushes towards multiculturalism, anti-racism, and anti-sexism at the University of California met with resistance from the political right. Condemnation of these progressive efforts was codified in the term *political correct(ness)* or PC (Cameron 1995; Fairclough 2003; Lakoff 2000; Suhr & Johnson 2003). It is worth noting that progressive organizations never advocated for or embraced political correctness as an ideology; the political right's framing of leftist discourse as "political correctness" is generally seen as a diversionary strategy meant to coalesce conservative outrage against advocacy for marginalized groups (Hall 1994; Kohl 1992). Nevertheless, through political rhetoric and media representations, the shift towards multiculturalism and accompanying rightwing accusations against political correctness in American universities informs contemporary instantiations of political engagement on campus.

Influential works that shaped the "anti-PC" movement include Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991). Both authors levy accusations against academia for promoting, for political purposes, self-victimization and "canon busting," that is, revising curricula through a more inclusive lens. Relatedly, in this time period anti-hate speech policies were being debated on university campuses (Ma 1995). Demonstrating the prominence of this ideological move, U.S. President George H.W. Bush offered these remarks at the University of Michigan commencement ceremony in 1991: "The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expression

off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits" (C-SPAN 1991). Rhetorical strategies like these served to frame attempts at institutional change as both reproducing errors of the past and as exclusively politically minded.

The next instantiation of conservative struggles on UC campuses arose in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when student-led calls for greater student diversity at the University of California were met with sharp opposition on the right. In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209, which prohibited discrimination against or preferential treatment toward any individual or group "on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting" (California Constitution Art. 1 §31). This law, which remains in effect, had immediate effects on diversity on University of California campuses (Okong'o 2006). Proposition 209 represented the first major challenge to affirmative action policies in California since Bakke 1978, a supreme court decision which upheld affirmative action, but found specific racial quotas to be impermissible (Regents of University of California v. Bakke 1978; cf. Hall 2000). In that case, Allan Bakke, a twice-denied applicant to the medical school at University of California, Davis, sued and won against the university claiming that he would have gained admission had the racial quota not been imposed. The Supreme Court ruled that the university may operate programs that grant racial preference, but not impose numerical quotas. Since then, the University of California Regents, in addition to implementing holistic review guidelines for admission to replace affirmative action-based review processes, formalized a diversity statement. The text in part states, "Diversity – a defining feature of California's past, present, and future – refers to the variety of personal experiences, values, and worldviews that arise from differences of culture and circumstance. Such differences include race, ethnicity,

gender, age, religion, language, abilities/disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and geographic region, and more" (Regents of the University of California 2010).

Beginning in the early 2010s, political conservatives appropriated such calls for diversity on university campuses, hoping to add what they saw as an issue of paramount importance: diversity of viewpoint (Haidt 2015). The residual implications of this concern is exemplified in the statement one of my study participants, Joe (pseudonyms are used for all participants), a 21-year-old white member of the College Republicans.

(1)

1 Joe: I think something that tends to be a little bit mischaracterized,
2 is when people are talking about being pro-diversity.
3 A lot of times,
4 they're not pro-diversity when it comes to ideological differences,
5 and differences of opinion.
6 They say they want diversity,
7 but not when it comes to political persuasion.
8 Or not when it comes to calmly talking about ideas.
9 It seems a bit counterintuitive.

The current viewpoint diversity movement maintains that diversity of political opinion is just as important as the other categories listed in the UC Regents statement, if not more so. This argument is built on the presupposition that university faculty are overwhelmingly politically liberal and that this liberal bias informs their research and teaching (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018). Viewpoint diversity is the basis of much of the contemporary conservative activism on University of California campuses; importantly, this activism is framed under the banner of the pursuit of "free speech." Hence, the original Free Speech Movement has been appropriated by its ideological opponents in order to advocate for conservative ends.

In this section, I have centered progressive students and described the waves of conservative clashes with these students on University of California campuses, which set the stage for the current cultural movement. In the remainder of this thesis, I center conservative students and their experience in the contemporary liberal university context.

## Ethnographic Context

In early 2019, the University of California launched the National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. The following is taken from the about section of the Center's website:

> As college campuses across the country have grappled with questions of free speech and civic engagement, many have experienced a level of activism, controversy and backlash unlike anything seen in this generation. As a result, a wide range of people — from college students to university presidents to leading legal scholars to the president of the United States — have questioned the meaning and role of free speech on college campuses. These questions have sparked a national debate about the intention, scope and application of the First Amendment and challenged long-held views about freedom of expression developed in the wake of the Free Speech Movement born at UC Berkeley.
>
> Cognizant of both the enduring constitutional principles of free speech and the nature of our changing times, the Center focuses on addressing if and how college students' relationship to the First Amendment has fundamentally shifted from the 1960s and what can be done to restore trust in the value and importance of free speech among college students, other members of university communities and broader society. (National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement 2019)

It is in this context of heightened awareness and shifting engagement with freedom of expression on college campuses that I situate this study. I intend for my work to speak to policymakers on college campuses who are dealing with issues of free expression. I also hope that this work speaks to current and future conservative students attending culturally left-leaning college campuses, including my own. My hope is that this ethnographic look at conservative student groups can help humanize the students engaging in conservative

activism while also contextualizing their discourse practices and highlighting the potential negative consequences of unmoderated free speech.

## Ethnographic Context

The University of California, with its rich history of politically engaged students, is an ideal site to conduct an ethnographic study of the discourse of contemporary conservative student groups. This study was conducted among students at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), a campus on the California Central Coast with a generally liberal student body. The participants were members of the UCSB chapters of two organizations: the Young Americans for Liberty and the College Republicans. The majority of the students participating in the study were members of the latter organization. The national College Republicans organization was founded in 1892 as the American Republican College League. There are over 1,500 college chapters, and the governing body, the College Republican National Committee, hosts annual regional and national conferences. The mission statement of the UCSB chapter is below:

> The UCSB College Republicans mission is to recruit, inform, train and empower every existing and potential College Republican at UCSB. College campuses today are ideological battlegrounds for the future of America due to the liberal domination over college faculty, curriculum and administration. We work for the future of the Republican Party and its conservative principles of freedom, opportunity, and limited government. *We are here to influence the future now. Our club is diverse in our Republicanism, also welcoming libertarians, moderate Republicans, and conservatives. Above all else we strive to encourage a refreshing dialogue beyond the liberal opinions of the lecture hall.* (ucsbrepublicans.squarespace.com/what-we-do; emphasis mine)

The Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) is a politically libertarian organization founded in 2008. There are approximately 760 chapters of YAL on college campuses across the United States, and members gather for annual regional and national conferences. The

goals and ideological distinctiveness of YAL can be seen in the mission statement of the UCSB chapter:

> We are the Young Americans for Liberty. We recognize the natural rights of life, liberty, and property set forth by our Founding Fathers. Our country was created to protect the freedoms of the individual and be directed by We the People. We recognize that freedom requires responsibility, and therefore we hold ourselves to a high standard of character and conduct. Integrity motivates our action. Principle defines our outlook towards government. Peace and prosperity drive our ambitions towards our countrymen. We inherit a corrupt, coercive world that has lost respect for voluntary action. *Our government has failed and dragged our country into moral decay. The political class dominates the agenda with a violent, callous, controlling grip. For this we do not stand. We welcome limited government conservatives, classical liberals, and libertarians who trust in the creed we set forth.* (orgsync.com/132629; emphasis mine)

While both clubs have their own histories and may take many forms from campus to campus, at UCSB, the membership between the College Republicans and the Young Americans for Liberty overlapped considerably during the period of study. In this thesis, I therefore refer to the study participants as *conservative students*, as participants regarded *conservative* as a label that was representative of both groups. In an interview with the then-president of YAL, I asked Alex, a 20-year-old white male, what political label would be most accurate for him and his group.

(2)

13 Alex: I'm fine to take the word conservative on.
14 And the reason being is because,
15 I think conservative and liberal,
16 Um,
17 The way they are used now.
18 And,
19 So the way I'm going to use them.
20 Y'know, language changes.
21 They're used as relative terms.
22 They're never--
23 I don't think they're used as definitive terms.
24 I don't think you're ever, *a* conservative or *a* liberal.
25 You are *conservative*, or you are *liberal*.

26 And, that's relative to a situation.

Noteworthy in Alex's statement is the notion that what it means to be a conservative is "relative" to the sociopolitical context (lines 21, 26). This idea is historically new and stands in contrast to the traditional ideal of a conservative worldview informed by unwavering moral and philosophical principles (Goldwater 1960). Alex's mention of the "way [*conservative* and *liberal*] are used now" (line 17) gestures at a new, contextually based understanding of conservatism. A first-year member of the College Republicans also touched on this point in a passing conversation with me, saying, "On this campus, if you believe that health care shouldn't be free, you are conservative. It's a really low bar." This perception of a "low bar" to be considered conservative functions as an implicit denunciation of campus liberals. The implication is that liberal policy positions are so extreme that even someone who takes a moderate stance is regarded as conservative.

In addition to denouncing campus liberals, both conservative student groups at UCSB actively resisted the perceived extreme liberal campus climate by inviting controversial conservative speakers to the university. The Spring 2016 UCSB YAL visit by notorious conservative provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos was highly publicized and well attended. Yiannopoulos, a former tech editor for Breitbart.com, a right-wing publication, and a Trump apologist, visited many campuses during the 2016 presidential campaign season. His speech on the topic "Feminism Is Cancer" was livestreamed and viewed nearly 300,000 times on YouTube. Figure 1, taken at the event, shows YAL club members carrying Yiannopolous into the venue on a throne.

Figure 1: Yiannopoulos carried on throne by UCSB conservative students, May 25, 2016.

Photo Credit: thebottomline.as.ucsb.edu

This image demonstrates the posture of UCSB's conservative student groups to embrace and amplify controversial topics and speakers. As club members reported to me, the elaborate entrance was not mandated by Yiannopoulos but was entirely their idea. The literal elevation of Yiannopoulos shows the club's alignment with the provocative aesthetic that he embodies, especially in light of the subject on which he spoke. This performance of provocative politics is an illustration of campus conservatives' anti-SJW message and deliberate antagonism of their ideological opponents. SJW is an abbreviation for social justice warriors, a derisive right-wing term for progressive individuals and groups. Many different kinds of conservative students participate in these antagonistic overtures. The following section discusses the varied stances students initially occupied when they joined one of the conservative groups.

## Conservative Personas in Conservative Student Spaces

In spite of the liberal reputation of UCSB and the University of California system in general, there were numerous politically conservative students on the UCSB campus during my research. Not all, however, were members of either College Republicans or Young Americans for Liberty, and different types of students gravitated to different conservative student spaces. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork, I have divided the members of both groups into emically arrived-at categories according to how individuals functioned within the group dynamic. I call these groups *cultural conservatives*, *debate enthusiasts, trolls,* and *bigots*. I regard these personae as informing students' initial stance or orientation to the group; these were especially salient within conservative students' first year on campus. My categorization allows for members to occupy more than one personae at a time and/or to shift their positions over their undergraduate career. After developing these classifications, I conducted follow-up interviews with participants for their responses; my categories were consistent with the impressions of the study participants and they also agreed with my individual categorization of each of them.

Cultural conservatives typically were raised in conservative contexts before coming to college. Many were from politically or socially conservative families and were raised in "red" areas of the United States or California, which are relatively socially and religiously homogenous. A marker of this group was that they had limited exposure to liberal ideals both in their home life and in their K-12 schooling. They were surprised by the prevailing liberal ideas on UCSB's campus and often felt othered or ostracized by their dormmates and classmates. For these students, conservative spaces served as a familiar setting where they could speak and hear ideas that were reminiscent of their prior social context.

Debate enthusiasts were typically students who were curious and passionate about debate and argumentation. They often participated in public speaking activities, such as debate clubs, mock trial, and model United Nations, both at college and in their previous schooling. Many were philosophy majors or minors and aspiring lawyers or politicians, and they took joy in engaging in the debate process. Debate enthusiasts were present in the conservative student spaces of UCSB to sharpen their debate skills by becoming familiar with prevailing arguments on the ideological right; they used these spaces to practice their arguments before deploying them against left-wing opponents. A vocal minority of this subgroup aspired to "roast" their opponents, that is, to utterly defeat their argumentation to such an extent that opponents were forced to resort to ad hominem attacks. These ad hominem attacks were consistently taken as evidence of a failed argument. Key to the discourse of these debate enthusiasts was the conceptualization of argumentation as abstract and distant. Maintaining intellectual distance while arguing in favor of a controversial topic enabled debate enthusiasts to disengage from any personal connection with the subject matter. In this frame, debates were disconnected from human experience and were mainly abstract intellectual games to be adjudicated philosophically. While this quality was perceived as a strength of debate for those who practiced it, conservative debate enthusiasts' ideological opponents who was left-wing arguments as a matter of validating their own and others' humanity were not afforded the luxury of intellectual distance.

Whereas the initial goal for some debate enthusiasts who participated in conservative student groups might have been to challenge themselves and hear new arguments, many debaters trended towards conservative apologetics. Debate enthusiasts who tried their hand at defending conservative positions on controversial topics perceived their activity as a

"game" to formulate a persuasive argument. Earnestness or conviction were irrelevant when this "game" was played.

While debate enthusiasts took pleasure in argument for its own sake, trolls were students who were typically in conservative student spaces to pursue a different kind of fun. They enjoyed "triggering the libs for the lols" (upsetting liberals for laughs), that is, intentionally saying or engaging in discourse and activities that would be upsetting to liberals, specifically to elicit a negative emotional response. Successful elicitation of such a reaction was seen as humorous. While these students may have had some right-wing ideological leanings, these leanings did not directly inform their discourse as much as the goal of getting a rise out of liberals. The aesthetic of this subgroup was to joke and provoke while appearing sincere. Trolls might appear to take positions on policy, social issues, law, and so on in earnest, but the goal was not to win the argument. Rather, it was to mock one's conversational partner and draw them into a strong emotional response while the troll himself (most trolls were male) remained emotionally distant. Although trolling involved the feigned performance of sincerity, it could also be disavowed as "just a joke." In this way trolling also offered cover to those who did indeed hold extreme positions, as the option of responding with "Just kidding" or "Why so serious?" was ever present. This ambiguity made it difficult to discern which positions were sincerely held, as, to the troll, advocating for one's beliefs was not the goal; having fun at the expense of liberals was the primary purpose of trolls' discourse.

Although trolls enjoyed performing bigotry regardless of their true beliefs, bigoted students were those who typically had a deliberate political agenda to promote and, whether directly or indirectly, aimed to spread ideals of racial, cultural, and religious contempt. More often than not, these students knew their political positions were unpopular even among

conservatives, so they were strategic in how they sowed these ideas among groups that would listen. Given the open-doors ethic of UCSB's conservative student spaces, bigots found a home in these groups, hoping to radicalize them. These students promoted white supremacy under the guise of ethnonationalism, misogyny and homophobia under the guise of traditional family values, and xenophobia under the guise of national border security. Bigots sometimes were honest and unapologetic about their stances and at other times used euphemism to lightly veil their intent. They were conscious of the extreme nature of their positions, but were convinced that most of the (largely) white male students in the groups secretly agreed with their conclusions, but wanted to avoid being called racists or misogynists. Bigots offered more palatable frames through which students might see a racist policy as not necessarily racist, thereby inviting unwitting conservative support of racist policies and ideologies. In short, these students had a political agenda that was served through their engagement with conservative students, which included recruitment to extreme positions and pushing the conversation in meetings to the extreme right.

Understanding the similarities and differences among the types of students participating in Young Americans for Liberty and College Republicans serves to draw into focus the differing motivations for attending the group meetings and other events. Different types of students engaged in different ways and had different motivations, and it is therefore important not to oversimplify the diversity of thought represented in these clubs. In short, not everyone participating in conservative student clubs started or ended with the same stance. In light of this issue, it is important to discuss my own positionality in this study and how I came to spend time with these conservative students.

## My Positionality

I agree with James Banks (1998) when he says, "I now believe that the biographical journeys of researchers greatly influence their values, their research questions, and the knowledge they produce" (p. 4). My lived experience and positionality greatly influence how and what I see and hear as a scholar. This being the case, it is valuable to establish who I am and how I came to do this work.

As the 2016 election season drew near, I found myself highly engaged in political discussions. I was transitioning from my position as an undergraduate student at UCLA to my emergent identity as a graduate student at UCSB. Given the anomalousness and public prominence of the presidential election season, I intentionally broke my typical rules of decorum and discussed politics with new and old acquaintances alike. Many people in my social sphere of influence were of a similar mind: they thought Donald Trump could never become the Republican candidate, and if he did, he would of course lose to any Democratic nominee. Very few, if any, of my acquaintances self-identified as Republican or conservative. If there was disagreement regarding who should be President, it was between proponents of Bernie Sanders and supporters of Hillary Clinton. I was conscious of the general, though nuanced, homogeneity of the positions my friends espoused. Almost all were self-avowed liberals, a fact I was not critical of, as I perceived their ideological positions not as liberal but as simply aligned with how-the-world-is. At most, I thought their homogeneity could be attributed to the leftward political leaning of the state of California or of the campus culture. Soon, however, I realized that something was off: The polls showing strong support for Trump, and media images of his packed rallies gave me pause. I wondered how this was possible. I knew no one who said that they were voting for Trump.

However, when the election results came in, I, along with many others in the United States, had a lot of processing to do. Rosa and Bonilla (2017) discuss similar responses to and implications of Trump's election. They aptly expound on the immediate aftermath of the election by presenting "two alternative perspectives—that Trump's political ascendance marks a new moment or that it rearticulates existing power relations" (p. 201), and they interrogate the consequences of either positionality with the goal of locating the election "within broader historical, political, and economic assemblages of which it is but one part." It was during my personal reflection on these kinds of questions that this project was conceived. While I agree with Rosa and Bonilla's assessment that Trump's victory was in line with the history of the United States and its betrayals of Black people, I really hoped this time would be different. Contributing to my surprise was the fact that I had been very intentional in talking through policy positions with the broadest cross-section of my network. The election results indicated that I apparently had missed a significant population. I had heard liberal condemnations of the "Fox News audience" as being stuck in an echo chamber, but I never considered that I might be stuck in one as well. I sought out conservative students at UCSB largely because I was sincerely curious about how conservatism operates discursively, especially among young people like myself, and to better understand how anyone could vote for Donald Trump for President of the United States.

My positionality is relevant and consequential to the collection and analysis of the data for this study. In lieu of feigning objectivity, I state my predispositions here and also shared them with my research participants, because my positionality informs how and why I do this work. I identify as Black, as male, and as a first-generation college student. Politically, I am ideologically left of center (in the United States context) on most if not all

policy positions. Prior to this research, I had had very little exposure to conservative-identified groups or individuals, and I was unfamiliar with contemporary arguments and justifications in favor of politically conservative policies. The learning curve was steep and I encountered several ethical dilemmas through this process. Elsewhere I reflect more fully upon my positionality in navigating these dilemmas and the process of doing this work (Muwwakkil forthcoming). I engaged my ignorance with sincere curiosity, directly asking about the ideas and topics about which I was unclear. During my fieldwork, when I spoke with friends and colleagues about the community with which I was working, it was not uncommon for me to be told to "be careful." When I asked why, the response was often that the groups were "hateful." However, I did not experience any personal racist attacks and felt very welcome as an individual in the club spaces. I am grateful for the generosity, kindness, and hospitality I was shown by the conservative students who participated in this study.

## Methods

In this study, the primary sociolinguistic ethnographic methods of data collection were participant-observation and ethnographic interviews. While the excerpts I include in this thesis are drawn from interviews, my field notes and observations served to inform my analytical decisions as well as providing broader cultural context. As an interpretive study (Maxwell 1996), it explores students' perspectives on their experiences. Using sociolinguistic ethnography allows me to "focus on the linguistic and semiotic resources used in social activities" and to interpret participants' "rationalities, meanings and actions" (Creese 2011 p. 42). For participant-observation, I attended weekly meetings of the College Republicans (CR) and the Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) over the course of six months (January

2017-June 2017). There, I took extensive field notes and selectively engaged in group discussions. While the membership of CR and YAL overlapped significantly, each club had a different executive board and a different weekly meeting agenda. Both meetings typically took place back-to-back on Tuesdays in reservable campus meeting rooms. The meetings, though open to the public, were held with the door closed and not locked. YAL typically met at 7 p.m. for an hour and CR met at 8 p.m. for an hour in the same room or another nearby. Most if not all YAL members went to the subsequent CR meeting, while a smaller subset of CR members attended both meetings.

I became involved with UCSB campus conservatives when I attended the first winter quarter meeting of YAL in January of 2017. At the start of the meeting, the president, Alex, asked me to introduce myself to the group. I did so, saying I was not conservative but rather was a graduate student looking to learn more about their group for research purposes and would like to talk to them further, if they were willing. I made a point to stress that I was sincerely curious and assured them that everything I wrote about them would be shared with them. Alex and other members of YAL that I spoke with that day were very welcoming and agreed to let me observe their meetings and take notes. Alex then introduced me to the president of CR, David, during the immediately following meeting an hour later, and I reiterated my request to the CR group. I was met with the same degree of hospitality.

During the meetings of both groups, I focused more on observing than participating. Eventually, I expanded my role as participant and began asking clarifying questions during group discussions when appropriate. I determined the level of appropriateness from the types of questions regularly asked in the meetings, and tried to model them in tone and content. I was also fortunate enough to be invited to joint post-meeting meals at local restaurants.

These included places like Hamburger Habit and Silver Greens. While there, many members eagerly answered my questions.

In addition to attending weekly meetings, I interviewed eight participants, four male-identified and four female-identified, for a total of approximately 12 hours of recording. These interviews were conducted one-on-one in a reserved library study room on campus and were scheduled after initial unrecorded one-on-one conversations. I chose to meet each participant on a separate date prior to scheduling a recorded interview so as to mitigate anxiety they may about the interviewing, and to further expand on my goals as a researcher. The interviews were semi-structured and informal (Levon 2018, p. 77); digressions were welcome and the order in which questions were posed changed according to the direction of the discussion. Additionally, to gain a more complete understanding of the participants, I conducted three follow-up interviews with available interviewees after my fieldwork was complete, sharing my developing analysis with them and getting their impressions. While I attempted to interview each person again, many of them had graduated or were difficult to reconnect with by the time I was completing my analysis.

Lastly, I also attended regional conferences for both CR, the 2017 California College Republicans Conference in San Jose, California and YAL, the 2017 Young Americans for Liberty Spring Summit in Los Angeles. At those events, I took photos and ethnographic field notes of the UCSB members' engagement with each other outside of the UCSB campus, as well as among their peers at other colleges and universities. At these events, I was able to observe how similar or dissimilar the UCSB students were to members of other chapters in California. Noteworthy is that, in both spaces, the UCSB chapter was well known. However, due to space limitations I do not discuss these issue in the following analysis.

I collected a large amount of data for this project, far more than I could reasonably use for this thesis. Due to space limitations, I do not examine the larger political strategy of engendering debates about free speech of college campuses from the political right. Nor do I address the students' engagement with online spaces or social media. The majority of the data presented below comes from observation in meetings and one-on-one interviews. This focus enables me to analyze how their discourse is deployed, taken up, and functions within conservative student spaces.

## Analysis

My data revealed that conservative student groups at UCSB coalesce around a shared sense of victimization and ostracism. As I demonstrate in the following analysis, this positionality of victimization is discursively constructed through three moves: (1) *contrastive essentialism,* through which liberals and conservatives are typified as inherently distinct groups (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005), (2) the *appropriation of civil rights discourse*, and (3) *memeing*, or the ironic intertextual performance of a culturally salient figure or concept. Through the first strategy, conservative students discursively framed the campus as inherently ideologically opposed to their positionality, particularly on the basis of "free speech," the curtailing of which results in conservative students' ostracism and social stigma. The second strategy enabled conservative students to frame themselves as a marginalized minority, deploying rhetoric used by marginalized communities to portray themselves as victimized on the basis of their identity. The third strategy positioned conservative students as necessarily innocent of any malice and as simply joking around when they entertained or invoked hateful ideas. All three of these discursive strategies crucially orient to an imagined

and constrained cause of "free speech" within a frame of free speech absolutism (Downing 1990). According to conservative students in this study as well as conservative discourse more broadly, freedom of speech is understood not as the freedom to express unpopular ideas without government sanction, the constitutional definition of free speech, but as freedom from social stigma for socially abhorrent speech. Key to this interpretation was the expectation that sincerity or earnestness (i.e., arguing in good faith) was not a prerequisite for engaging in a debate. The immateriality of sincerity is noteworthy because it functionally separates one's argument from one's belief. In other words, one may not, in this logic, treat a person who is arguing in favor of discrimination as though they believe in discrimination. This factor is important for understanding how "free speech" is viewed and deployed within the frame of conservative student discourse, as it makes irrelevant the inferring of a person's view based on the positions for which they advocate. Thus, assertions of a person being racist or sexist could never be accurately discerned based solely on the things a person might say. This is not to say that these students are engaging in argument insincerely. Rather, that sincerity is not seen as relevant to that argument.

Before expounding on how each of the three discursive strategies emerged in the interview data, it is useful to examine how they have been modeled and deployed by provocative conservative speakers on college campuses. For example, all three strategies were displayed by conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, who was invited to UCSB in 2017 by the College Republicans. The title of his talk was "Lies, Prejudice and Division: The Legacy of the #BLM[Black Lives Matter] Movement."

(3) (https://youtu.be/wGDnJ6QgUqw 2:12-3:15)

1 Shapiro: Intersectionality is the theory of the day.
2 And this is the theory that says that,

3 we are going to judge your virtue,
4 we're gonna judge your capacity to be a good person,
5 by the color of your skin or by your sexual orientation.
6 And precisely the opposite of the Martin Luther King idea.
7 The idea now is that,
8 Your identity is your virtue.
9 So, this creates a hierarchy of victimhood.
10 And the hierarchy of victimhood goes something like this,
11 There's LGBT people at the top,
12 and then Blacks and then Hispanics,
13 and then women and then Asians then Jews are near the bottom here.
14 And then straight white males are at the very bottom.
15 Because straight white males are the great victimizers.
16 And we can tell whether what you say has value,
17 not based on what you're actually saying,
18 but based instead on your place in this hierarchy of victimhood.
19 So if we could somehow find the unicorn of intersectionality.
20 You know the bisexual transgender female little person whose three quarters Black one quarter Native American and disabled.
21 If we could find that person, we could all just go home.
22 Because that person would have every great view.
23 Because no matter what that person said it would have to be right.
24 You could not be more of a victim than this human being.
25 And victimhood,
26 in our culture,
27 now confers privilege.

Shapiro's discussion is built on a (mis)reading of Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) influential article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policy." Shapiro simplifies and distorts the theory of intersectionality, resulting in a specious premise that intersectionality theory evaluates the social identity of a speaker in ascertaining the veracity or value of what they say. Line 23 demonstrates that this (mis)reading, and Shapiro's argument more generally, is centrally focused on speech: "Because no matter what that person said it would have to be right."

All three discourse strategies of conservative students are illustrated in this example. First, the framing of "straight white males" (lines 14, 15) as the victims of the "hierarchy of

victimhood" (lines 9, 10, 18) is an example of contrastive essentialism by establishing a dichotomy that is externally enforced. Shapiro frames "our culture" (line 26) as the agent that casts white straight males as the "great victimizers" (line 15), implying that white straight males passively receive this label and its consequences. Second, referencing the "Martin Luther King idea" (line 6) (presumably the Civil Rights Movement/ "I have a Dream" speech) is an example of the appropriation of civil rights discourse. This strategy entails borrowing terms and ideas developed for the liberation of marginalized populations and recasting them so they functionally undermine their initial goals. In this way, the "Martin Luther King idea" is deployed to benefit "straight white males" at the expense of the intended goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Third, the "hierarchy of victimhood" is an example of memeing, as this term is ironically presented as a sincerely held belief that aligns with a shared salient cultural artifact. This statement engages recognizable conservative critiques of activist marginalized communities, framing them as whiny (Hill 2008). Here, Shapiro invokes the "culture of victimhood" trope popular in mainstream conservative discourse and builds upon it to present a world that necessarily maligns straight white men (Cabrera 2014).

This framing is clearly intended to be ironic, as Shapiro positions contemporary liberal society as regarding as virtuous those people who are not straight, white, or male, while also maligning straight white males as non-virtuous. Shapiro asserts that "in our culture" ideas are evaluated not as to their merit, but based on the virtue (measured by aggregated social oppression) of the person who proposes the idea (lines 19-23). This assertion not only mocks people with marginalized positionalities and their ideas, but also paradoxically frames people with socially powerful positionalities as the true victims in the

contemporary social moment (lines 14 and 15). In short, Shapiro claims that white, straight males are victimized because of their white, straight maleness and that the locus of this victimization is their right to free speech. As I discuss below, Shapiro's discourse resonates with the animating ideas of the conservative students at UCSB, as illustrated through my analysis of their three primary discourse strategies.

**Contrastive Essentialism**

Conservative students tended to identify themselves through a discursive move that I call *contrastive essentialism.* This move is the means by which conservative students construct conservative identity in contrast to liberal identity. Or, to put it another way, this strategy presupposes that if a student's views are not considered liberal, the student is necessarily classified as conservative. This polarization was evident even among YAL members, who as libertarians were often socially liberal –for example, many YAL members advocated for legalization of all drugs and opposed restrictions to abortion. Contrastive essentialism produced two important discursive effects: (1) It enforced a rigid binary of possible political positionalities rather than moderate or more nuanced or complex positions, and (2) it removed agency from conservative students by positing that they were rendered conservative not by their own beliefs or identity but by the extremism of liberal ideology and discourse.

The context of UCSB's left-leaning campus played a crucial role in conservative students' discourse of contrastive essentialism. At college, many conservative students were confronted with the most diverse social setting of their lives. They were also taking classes that offered a more critical and thorough examination of historical and social realities than they had previously experienced, in part through the inclusion of non-majority perspectives.

For those entering their first year, the transition from high school student to university student took place alongside the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Kantanis 2000, p. 106). The combination of uncertainty produced by their shifting social and historical understanding and their new and relatively diverse social setting, led some conservative students to experience anxiety about their place in the world. This anxiety was then discursively harnessed and aimed at a constructed ideological opponent: the amorphous "left." The category of the "left" comprised, among others, "social justice warriors," "socialists," and "race baiters," that is, anyone who invoked the idea of race or racism. Invoking race among conservative students was often seen as either a means by which those on the left shut down an argument due to a lack of debating acumen or a form of "virtue signaling": performing "wokeness" or social awareness that presents the speaker as a satisfactorily moral person according to liberal values.

The effect of essentializing a ubiquitous, anomalous, and homogenous "left" was the creation of a common enemy against which conservatives students could mount a resistance. This collective resistance served as a socializing process, as members commiserated with each other over their shared experiences with the "left". Example 4 demonstrates this shared sense of ostracism. Before the example begins, I have asked Alex how it feels to be conservative at UCSB.

(4)

65 Alex: Um, which is, so how does it feel to be conservative.
66 Um, it's very.
67 Isolating.
68 Um:.
69 And I wouldn't just say for me.
70 I would say for a lot of the people around me.
71 Um.
72 I spent my whole first year here basically staying alone in my dorm.

73 Uh, not because--
74 Not just because I had like views that were different than other people.
75 But because I didn't have ways to express it to those other people without worrying that they were gonna say,
76 No you're not right nah like,
77 You're a bigot.
78 Leave.

Alex generalizes from his own experience to other conservative students (lines 69-70), asserting that it is not uncommon for them to feel isolated on campus. He indicates that his isolation was, to a degree, self-imposed, as he "spent my whole first year here basically staying alone in my dorm." (line 72) His rationale that "other people" (lines 74-75) might consider him a "bigot" (line 77) if he expressed his political views reflects an awareness of the predictable social stigma he stood to encounter. Notably, he does not claim that his views were directly censored or proscribed, but rather, that he was averse to the perceived consequence (i.e., social stigma) of expressing his political views, and that his aversion to facing the consequences of his political views led him to isolate himself. In this way, according to Alex, the campus context with its perceived ubiquity of liberal values, made conservatives students feel ostrisized, especially in their first year. This perception of isolation led conservative students to form a community with one another, bonding over their shared experiences of perceived ostracism as well as developing ways to "express themselves" (line 75) without the consequence of social stigma. This perception of trauma helped to solidify the contrastive designation not only along the lines of conservative versus liberal, but also on the basis of experiencing oneself as isolated versus in the campus mainstream.

## **The Appropriation of Liberal Discourse**

Conservative students' characterization of themselves as isolated due to liberal

ubiquity does not only established a rigid contrast between groups, but it is also an appropriation of the trauma felt by minoritized students experiencing "solo status" (Sekaquaptewa & Thompson 2002). Doing so situates political ideology alongside social categories that organize structural oppression like race and gender. Positioning political ideology in this way to validate the function of conservative student spaces is paradoxical, given that within conservative student discourse, liberal students who seek out "safe spaces" (Kennedy 2001) with like-minded others are considered sensitive "snowflakes", afraid to encounter upsetting ideas. Yet, as example 4 above indicates, conservative students also positioned themselves as victims. I call this co-opting of liberal political arguments to the benefit of conservative students the *appropriation of liberal discourse*. This discursive appropriation is by no means an endorsement of civil rights goals; rather, it is used to lay claim to the moral authority of this discourse while espousing conservative positions. For example, conservative students' advocacy for "viewpoint diversity" as manifested through, for instance, inviting controversial conservative speakers to campus is a borrowed from diversity discourse through the frame of inclusion (Ahmed 2012). Example 5 is taken from an interview with Dave, a fourth-year student and former executive director of the College Republicans. Notice how contrastive essentialism works in concert with the deployment of liberal discourse strategies to build a structural oppression narrative.

(5)

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 Dave: | But overall the climate of the campus, |
| 2 | it certainly doesn't feel welcoming to people who are conservative. |
| 3 | If you look at public demonstrations or sit ins or even pieces or art or political messages, |
| 4 | or AS [Associated Students] campaigning. |
| 5 | None of it seems geared towards conservatives and it's certainly disenfranchising. |
| 6 | I wouldn't say the campus is openly hostile to conservatives. |

7 A lot of times it's more so in a covert way.
8 At the end of the day it still doesn't feel like your opinion is as welcome if you're a conservative.
9 You almost feel like a second-class citizen as far as like a political hierarchy goes on campus.

Dave's framing of student demonstrations that are not geared towards conservatives as "disenfranchising" (line 5) is borrowed directly from civil rights discourse, specifically in relation to white efforts to deny Black citizens their right to vote. Likening the liberal political climate of UCSB to the disenfranchisement of civil rights implies that conservative students are victims of deliberate political oppression. This same discourse is invoked when Dave states that conservative students "almost feel like a second-class citizen" (line 9). Framing the campus as a place where "political demonstrations or sit ins" (line 3) take place but one in which it "doesn't feel like your opinion is as welcome if you're a conservative" (line 8) serves to further the narrative of victimization. In this way, Dave suggests that a traditionally liberal means by which to resist victimization -public protest- in fact victimizes conservative students.

A second function of the appropriation of civil rights discourse emerged when conservative student club members engaged with political opponents while tabling on-campus or during events they sponsored. Here, the appropriation functioned as a marketing technique, couching conservative ideas within a framework palatable to the more moderate members of what they perceived as a left-leaning campus audience. Conservative students were fully aware that liberal students who might engage them during a tabling session or public event were probably not going to be won over by their arguments. This strategy was designed to engage both with conservative students not already affiliated with YAL or CR and with "normies," or non-conservative students who might be converted. This strategic

appropriation is illustrated in Figure 2, showing a member of YAL advocating for Nazis' right to free speech in an open campus space. This act is modeled on public advocacy for oppressed communities. This demonstration took place in Fall of 2017, soon after an incident wherein a protester punched alt-right leader Richard Spencer.


Figure 2 YAL public demonstration
(Photo taken by Avigail McClelland Cohen)

A similar appropriation of civil rights discourse is seen in the notion of "viewpoint diversity" as a form of diversity similar to race, gender, sexuality, and so on. In my interview with Dave, for example, this issue arose when I asked how he felt about the characterization of conservative student groups as "hateful":

(6)

1 Dave: It bothers me that we're characterized as hateful.
2 Because I don't think it came from a genuine place.
3 I think it was a way to dismiss a small body of people.
4 And try to say their opinions don't matter.
5 And they're not valid.
6 I'd say the whole point of the meetings.

7 Is to have an ideologically diverse space.
8 Where you can put forward any opinion.
9 Not be personally judged.
10 Or face repercussions for it and have people discuss.
11 You are gonna get people with hateful ideologies that come.
12 We've had people on the right and the left who have come into the meeting.
13 And been like wow we can talk about whatever we want.
14 And go at it.

Dave acknowledges that there are indeed (YAL) club attendees who have hateful ideologies, but that they are a "small body of people" (line 3). He does not condemn students with hateful ideologies, but rather chides those students who would "say their opinions don't matter. And they're not valid" (lines 4-5). He argues that creating a space where "you can put forth any opinion" (line 8) necessarily means that the club will "get people with hateful ideologies that come" (line 11), but he considers that outcome to be "the whole point of the meetings" (line 6). Dave extols the conservative student club as a free-speech space where "we can talk about wherever we want" (line 13). This, however, is a privileged position that does not take into consideration the consequences of allowing hateful ideologies to flourish in public campus spaces. This oversight (or underestimation) is possibly born out of the relatively homogenous white racial make-up of the group. In the absence of Black members, white nationalism may sound like an interesting idea to engage, for example. (As discussed further in Muwwakkil [in preparation], this topic was discussed openly at a meeting I attended.) Likewise, in the absence of Indigenous people, ownership of land by conquest may not sound controversial. Although the idea of being free to speak about anything, no matter how hateful, without being "judged" (line 9) can seem like a benefit, the possible negative consequences of this version of free speech are not seriously considered. A side effect of having a space governed by the principle that any idea is welcome, no matter how hateful

and outlandish, is that some individuals (i.e., trolls) will argue for ideas they may not believe just to see if they can defend them as a part of a rhetorical "game." However, the very act of invoking and defending, say, white nationalism may frame the idea as palatable to some listeners. Failing to consider these effects, Dave appropriates liberal values of diversity and inclusion while facilitating a safe space for the expression of hateful ideologies.

The appropriation of liberal discourse thus had two functions among conservative students: to claim victimhood and to celebrate their clubs as protectors of free speech. Arguing that the lack of conservative viewpoint representation on campus created an environment of victimization that conflated political ideology with categories of longstanding inequality such as race and gender. This position was at best ahistorical, and it is hard to grasp whether this was an earnest belief, a marketing strategy, or both. As I discussed earlier in this thesis, there indeed has been ideological persecution on U.S. campuses, but it has never been against conservative ideology. Positioning political ideology alongside identity categories enabled conservative groups to engage with the campus in a recognizable activist way while also challenging the position of proponents of social equity.

**Memeing**

The third discourse strategy I identified in my data is what I call *meming* or the ironic intertextual performance of a salient cultural artifact. Memeing is derived from (internet) memes, which can be understood as "cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon" (Shifman 2014, p. 18). Entailed in the concept of a meme is mutual intelligibility, virality, and iterativity. This is to say, a meme may be entextualized in one context and then reentextualized in a new context to index different meanings (Bauman & Briggs 1990). Memeing, by extension, is the enactment of a

meme in conversation.

Among conservative students, memeing could serve as a shibboleth, testing interlocutors' in-group or out-group status by invoking knowledge of conservative memes. An in-group member could meme to a group and then gauge the response to get an idea of the shared knowledge base in the room. For this reason, memeing could also make opaque the earnestness of an individual's personal stance on an issue. This ambiguity is important when considering that group members were generally confident about their ability to discern when a person was memeing and when they were being serious. This confidence was evident in a follow-up interview with Nate, a former president of YAL. I asked how he could be sure what a given club member really thought about an issue, given the group's frequent claims of "joking" rhetorical "games."

(7)

444 Nate: I'd like to think that you can ask,
445 you can be like,
446 so what do you actually think?
447 And I think generally you'd get an answer.
448 But you don't want to ask—
449 Like you shouldn't have to ask.
450 In some sense.
451 Like if you're this principled group,
452 but you're trying to do this thing.
453 But I also think,
454 I think a lot of this,
455 is intergroup memeing.
456 Right these are on these Facebook groups and memeing to each other.
457 And there's this assumption of like,
458 this is safe to do.
459 Like we're not,
460 We're not representatives of this club.
461 We're not representatives of this movement,
462 we're just kids making jokes to each other,
463 about maybe terrible things maybe not,
464 but they're jokes.
465 And um,

this isn't,
we're not having a real conversation about our beliefs.
We're just memeing.
We're just making jokes laughing saying silly stuff.

Lines 447-449 demonstrate the ambiguity present within memeing, in that, if felicitous, correct interpretation of the meme is presumed. On the surface, if in-group memes are intelligible to in-group members, there ought not be ambiguity. So how is one to tell the difference between "jokes" about "terrible things" (lines 462-463) and "having a real conversation about our beliefs (line 467)? Later in the interview, Nate detailed an incident with another student where he confronted this type of ambiguity.

(8)

Jamaal: You can't tell who, who as I—
Who am I talking to here?
Like what is your actual position.
Is this a—
What are you doing.
Um and there's that greyness and kinda happens there,
where if it were to be the case that you happen to be a racist,
this is a great mask.
To put on and be like,
you really believed me?
That's telling about you actually.
Nate: I've done that.
Jamaal: <Laughter>
Nate: Some girl,
I said some like, I was like.
You know I hate Black people.
And she was like.
But why?
And I was like,
I freaked out I was like.
What the fuck are you talking about?
And I was like.
I guess I have no one to blame but myself if you thought that that was like something I might actually say.

In line 347, Nate reports jokingly saying, "You know I hate Black people" and then says he "freaked out" (line 351) when his interlocutor thought he was serious. In this instance, Nate was performing a "typical conservative" meme – that is a meme that mocks the assumption that to be conservative is to be racist. However, his interlocutor apparently did not recognize this meme, responding to the surface statement in surprise: "But why?" (line 349). This response jarred Nate into recognizing that he had "no one else to blame" but himself if his interlocutor thought that he did indeed hate Black people. Thus, despite Nate's claim in example 7 above that "you shouldn't have to ask" (line 449), in example 8 he recognizes the ambiguity that memeing produces and how easy it might be for a person to mistake another's memeing for sincerely held beliefs.

While the problem of ambiguity present within memeing was sometimes acknowledged by members, it was difficult to resolve within the club spaces. The difficulty arose through two potentially competing motivations: the desire to promote free speech as a mobilizing issue and, the desire to expand the clubs' membership. On one hand, an "edgy" space where people play around with dangerous ideas can be fun for those that "get the joke," and like-minded people will join and participate. On the other hand, in a space that does not moderate speech, the mask of ambiguity that memeing affords invites extremists to participate. Moreover, if and when the edginess reaches a point at which it is inhospitable to the "normies," then recruitment of new members is difficult. Chris, a former CR president and fourth-year student, voices this tension.

(9)

1 Chris: You have the moderate conservatives,
2 and then you have the nut jobs.
3 And you know,
4 Moderate conservatives spent a significant,

amount of time,
at least they did for a long time,
spent a significant amount of time trying to
distance themselves from,
anyone who was farther right than them.
The nut jobs.
Oh I'm not like *them*.
Some people kinda woke up one day,
and actually I think this is part of a lot of,
the reason that Trump was elected.
They kinda woke up one day and said like that,
just doesn't work.
You can't demonize people who are more on,
your side.
You're kinda sucking up to your opponent.
And that just doesn't serve a purpose that is,
gonna help you win.
And so,
There is actually a significant amount of,
hostility towards a person who will come,
into this group and start trying to moderate it.
Right, because moderating us isn't how
we're gonna succeed.
And that, obviously, is something that
probably has to be watch out for.
Because it could lead to,
you certainly don't want to give,
the most right-wing person that you can find all the status.
That's not a good idea
But I also see the point of it.
And I ultimately,
I think most of the people in the group are,
not half as edgy as they let on.
They just.

Jamaal: It's fun.

Chris: It's a game
And It's a game that's meant to scare off
people who are less,
less willing to be committed to it I think.

This example speaks to the negative consequences associated with allowing everyone's ideas into the club space, as well as offering some insight into why the clubs

nevertheless do so. Chris starts by referring to the "nut jobs" (line 2) as a potential constituency and offers a historical interpretation that, in years past, it was the practice of "moderate conservatives" to distance themselves from the "nut job" conservatives (lines 4-11). Chris characterizes this practice as "sucking up to your opponents" (line 19) (i.e., liberals) and demonizing "people who are more on your side" (lines 17-18) (i.e., fellow conservatives). First, it softens the extreme nature of the positions taken by the "nut jobs," making their existence in the group more palatable by conceiving of them as "not half as edgy as they let on" (line 37). Second, it frames the CR as necessarily immoderate: "there is actually a significant amount of hostility towards a person who will come into this group and start trying to moderate it" (lines 23-25). The freedom to be "edgy" is not merely a side effect of the free speech absolutism; rather, "edginess" is a necessary characteristic of this ideology and, therefore, permeates the space.

Memeing allowed for plausible deniability in voicing sincerely held but extreme beliefs. At the same time, memeing was a socializing mechanism through which conservative students engaged with their shared knowledge in a fun way. As noted above, knowledge of and ability to interpret memes could serve as a shibboleth, dividing the insiders from the outsiders while also implicitly encouraging the latter to participate in conservative media so they too could be in on the joke. However, free speech absolutism, coupled with an intentional lack of moderation, made conservative student spaces attractive to extremists ("nut jobs"), who came and, through memeing, seed extreme ideas while not being held accountable for holding and advocating these positions.

## **Change Over Time**

Having analyzed the three discursive strategies of conservative students, I now turn to the trajectory of an individual student over the course of his college career. This final analysis is useful in illustrating how and why students shifted in their engagement with conservative student spaces over time. As first-year student, Nate was an eager debate enthusiast and member of YAL. He was also one of my first interviewees for this study. His trajectory through YAL is informative as to some of the internal and external pressures that influenced students to shift their engagement with conservative student spaces. Example 10 is from a follow-up interview I conducted with Nate in June 2018, during the end of his second year of college. Here, he discusses how he unexpectedly came to serve in a leadership capacity in YAL as well as his ambitions for the club.

(10)

79 Nate: So I thou—
80 me at the time I'm like oh my gosh this is incredible I'm gonna be,
81 right as a freshman I'm gonna be the president of this great club.
82 and I you know,
83 and I felt you know that I deserved it.
84 Not deserved it but was fit for the job.
85 Jamaal: Yeah.
86 Nate: I felt qualified.
87 Jamaal: Qualified.
88 Nate: Especially like debate-wise and stuff.
89 So,
90 so I ascended to the presidency,
91 and everything was great,
92 and I was really excited and had a great vision.
93 I think for the club I really wanted to grow membership and my,
94 primary goal was to,
95 sort of,
96 almost like um what's it called,
97 like PR but like,
98 um I guess some sort of,
99 I guess some sort of PR campaign,
100 to a get debate occurring on campus.
101 And not just ones where students watch,
102 people but where students are debating.

103 I came in with this very classic view of University of you know.
104 there's a place where people argue and,
105 you know the forum of ancient whenever you know.
106 This is academia or something you know.
107 Got here and that was super not the case.

In this example, Nate gives voice to his expectations both of college and of YAL. He establishes his positionality as a debate enthusiast (line 88), his desire to bring substantive debate to the campus (line 100) due to his view of the university (line 103), and his subsequent disenchantment when he found that both the club and the university were not what he expected (line 107). Nate did in fact accomplish much of what he set out to do as the president of YAL. He instituted an ongoing topic-based program he called The Forum, in which he invited non-conservative student groups to participate in open discussions. These discussions were well attended and were seen as successful by conservative students. He also attempted to "mainstream" the YAL club meetings, encouraging members to be mindful about memeing and how it might look to the "normies" who came to check out the club. He received resistance internally from many club members, who sought to maintain the meme-heavy aesthetic of YAL meetings. Due to his prominent position as president of YAL, he also perceived pressure externally from the broader campus community. Example 11, from later in the interview, reveals Nate's meta-awareness of how he might have been viewed by non-conservative students.

(11)

232 Nate: I didn't know if people were hating me,
233 and if they were hating me it's because they thought I hated them.
234 And you can't quite,
235 broach that topic.
236 You know I'm not going to go to a party there's all of these people who hate me and I'm gonna say look,
237 you guys,
238 think I hate you I really don't.

239 So don't hate me but you can't,
240 not gonna happen so.
241 Anyway I was just very uncomfortable.
242 I just wanted to be a student again.
243 I just wanted to be,
244 solitary.
245 And go about my life,
246 and I felt like,
247 everywhere I went,
248 whether or not it was true,
249 I felt like,
250 I was this political figure who was,
251 deeply hated,
252 people wanted to hurt me,
253 people think,
254 I think the thing that hurt me most,
255 or was more most upsetting,
256 was people thinking I hate them,
257 not just them hating me but thinking I hate them.

Nate here wrestles with the consequences of his position as a public "political figure" on campus (line 250). He laments the idea that, given his position, people might feel afraid of him and that their fear could be justified. He is particularly upset not only that fellow students might hate him but that they think he hates them (lines 232-233, lines 255-257). In lines 236-240, he conveyed a sense of helplessness, implying that although he understands why a person might hate him, he could not imagine a means by which to convey that he, in fact, does not.

Nate's anxiety around his self-conception, in concert with club-internal conflict, led him to step down from his position as president abruptly in the middle of his term. In example 12, Nate discusses an incident directly following one of the Forum events, where he and a visiting representative of the national YAL organization had some very tense interpersonal interactions that catalyzed his decision to step away.

(12)

311Nate: And,
312 I had this um,
313 extreme,
314 fit like a sort of an extreme panic attack with paranoia et cetera thinking you know is this guy trying to kill me all sorts of crazy stuff,
315 But in this fit of panic,
316 you know I think uh,
317 you know a panic attack can be really useful,
318 to like understanding what you're afraid of and things like this.
319 And sort of all just came to a head here,
320 where I feel like I hate this person I don't want to interact with any of this kind of weird scummy political stuff.

Nate's interaction with the representative from national YAL, compounded with the pressures he was experiencing club-internally and externally, led him to have a panic attack, at which point he completely disconnected from his political position on campus and his leadership role in YAL. After stepping down, he did not attend any of the weekly meetings and was not further involved in either YAL or CR. He continued to identify as a conservative student, but did not feel that conservative student spaces were the best place for him and, in the end, he was happy to get back to being just a student.

Nate's experience, while not representative of conservative students (not every club member becomes president, and not every student becomes alienated from these clubs), does demonstrate that the position of conservative students in conservative student groups was not static. Nate's expectations of YAL and the university came up against the realities of campus politics and his personal life, and he decided that his involvement in the club was not worth the trouble. Like Nate, many students who interacted with conservative student spaces did not frequent such spaces for their entire college career. Whether their reasons were logistical, ideological, or emotional, or all three, conservative students demonstrated an ability to change their level of engagement with the two clubs. This suggests that the safe

space that these clubs provided was often temporary, serving different functions for different students at different times in their lives.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that conservative student groups on a liberal campus coalesced around a shared sense of victimization centered around a highly selective and limited version of "free speech." I have demonstrated that this positionality of victimization was discursively constructed through three steategies: (1) contrastive essentialism, through which liberals and conservatives are typified as inherently distinct groups, contrastively designated to remove agency from conservative club members in their identity alignment, (2) the appropriation of liberal discourse, which functioned to position political ideology on an equal footing with race and gender consideration on the basis of and as worthy of diversity and inclusion, and (3) memeing, which masked and excused extreme ideas within the community as "jokes." Finally, I have shown "free speech" was the discursive glue that bound disparate ideological positions together in the formation of conservative student identity and activism. Conservative students commiserated about their perceived persecution related to their exercise of "free speech," and conservative student clubs functioned as safe spaces where bonding and resistance strategies could be developed. However, these spaces were not necessarily static in their membership, as students could become disenchanted with the clubs or limit their attendance for other reasons.

The university has historically been a site of student political identity formation. Student's political identities emerge as a part of the transitional nature of the college years and is influenced by this dynamic. Increased independence and agency when students leave

home, coupled with a scholarly environment, makes the university fertile ground for young minds to explore. For many, the university context will be the most racially and politically diverse setting of their lives. Some welcome the egalitarian university environment, eagerly growing in social, historical and political awareness. Others, often based on their pre-college social context, initially find the change in environment troubling. They see the critical, questioning posture of the university as ideologically opposed to their pre-college experience and often take advocacy for the minority as condemnation of the majority. Difficult conversations with roommates, hesitant engagement in classroom discussions, and an overall feeling of isolation can make conservative student spaces feel like a bastion of ideological security.

Even as conservative student groups are positioned as safe spaces for politically right-of-center students, the orientation of these spaces around the cause of "free speech" has some troubling side effects. The freedom to argue for any position, often masked within a liberal discourse frame, and where memeing allows sincerity to be obfuscated, enables hateful and damaging ideologies to persist. The discursive logic of the space presumes that good arguments will prevail over bad arguments, but some participants are less concerned with winning arguments and more concerned with planting ideological seeds. A space that does not moderate its input is susceptible to extremist infiltration, the most immediate victims being earnest, curious, right-of-center first-year students. Additionally, the conservative focus on "free speech" conflates freedom of expression with freedom from the social consequences for that expression. This constrained sense of "free speech" entails not suffering social stigma for having voiced potentially reprehensible ideas, so that "freedom of speech" is in effect freedom from the negative consequences of speech.

The conservative students in my study, however, were agentive in their engagement with conservative campus spaces. They may have come to these spaces for one reason, may have chosen to stay for another, and chose to leave for a third. The students demonstrated an ability to change throughout their time in college. Those who used a conservative space as a transitional base may have attended club meetings less frequently once they acclimated to university life. Those who used it as a space for debate and argumentation may have eventually found other spaces that were more conducive to their goals, such as model United Nations, the Atheist/Skeptic/Objectivism Club, and so on. And those who used the clubs as a space to "trigger the libs" may have grown tired of the social stigma associated with being obnoxious, or may simply have matured and discovered other hobbies. This variability illustrates the mutability of students in conservative spaces.

Finally, much of what I have analyzed in this thesis as conservative student discourse overlaps with the discourse of the alt-right (Hawley 2017). I do not mean to claim that to be young and conservative is necessarily to be alt-right. Rather, I mean to suggest that, due to the current focus on "free speech" that permits heinous political topics to persist, conservative student groups are susceptible to infiltration by individuals on the extremist right. Moreover, the discourse strategies I have examined here make it difficult to tell the difference between a sincere racist ethno-nationalist and a moderate conservative performing white supremacy memes, as the two often sound the same.

The absolute freedom to speak about anything without consequence in conservative student spaces is a double-edged sword. On one hand, conservative clubs are spaces where students from various lived experiences and political positionalities may bring their ideas and questions and discuss the merits of different perspectives. This ability to explore ideas

without fear of ostracism or personal judgement serves to validate students coming from conservative cultural contexts and offers them a safe space to develop as they engage with the campus. On the other hand, it is also an attractive space for those who hope to radicalize and recruit others into extreme positions. Ultimately, it is for the conservative student community to decide if the trade-off between freedom to address any topic and willfully blind exposure to extremist recruitment is worth the risk.

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